

Field Report

Johnstown Flood National Memorial

■ 1.0 Summary

Figure 1. View of Lake Conemaugh Bed



The Johnstown Flood National Memorial (NM), located in southwestern Pennsylvania, commemorates the over 2,000 lives lost due to break in the old South Fork Dam on May 31, 1889. The Park preserves the remains of the South Fork Dam and portions of the former Lake Conemaugh bed and provides educational and recreational opportunities for 178,413 annual visitors (1999). Figure 1 shows a view of the Visitor Center from the far embankment of the Lake Conemaugh bed.

The average visit to the memorial is approximately two hours, which allows for sufficient parking turnover and little to no congestion, even during most peak season days. The Park currently rents a bus and conducts tours during summer Sundays. These tours circle the old lakebed and visit the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club Historic District,

where a number of buildings from the time of the flood still stand. The Park would like to continue that service and possibly expand these interpretive opportunities with the following services:

- The Staple Bend Tunnel, the oldest railroad tunnel in the United States, has been purchased by the NPS and is being renovated. It will be part of the Allegheny Portage NHS unit, which is 20 miles away, but is only seven miles from the Johnstown Flood NM. Because Staple Bend is only accessible via a narrow, Winding County road and parking will be limited, a shuttle from the Johnstown Flood Visitor Center should be considered.
- A shuttle service between the Visitor Center, St. Michael and/or downtown Johnstown would help visitors to understand the path of the flood and help the Park to interpret resources in both those locations. It is likely that this would begin as a tour until a larger market for shuttle service was established.

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

The Johnstown Flood NM is located in southwestern Pennsylvania approximately 10 miles northeast of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, off U.S. Route 219 (see Figure 2).

2.2 Administration and Classification

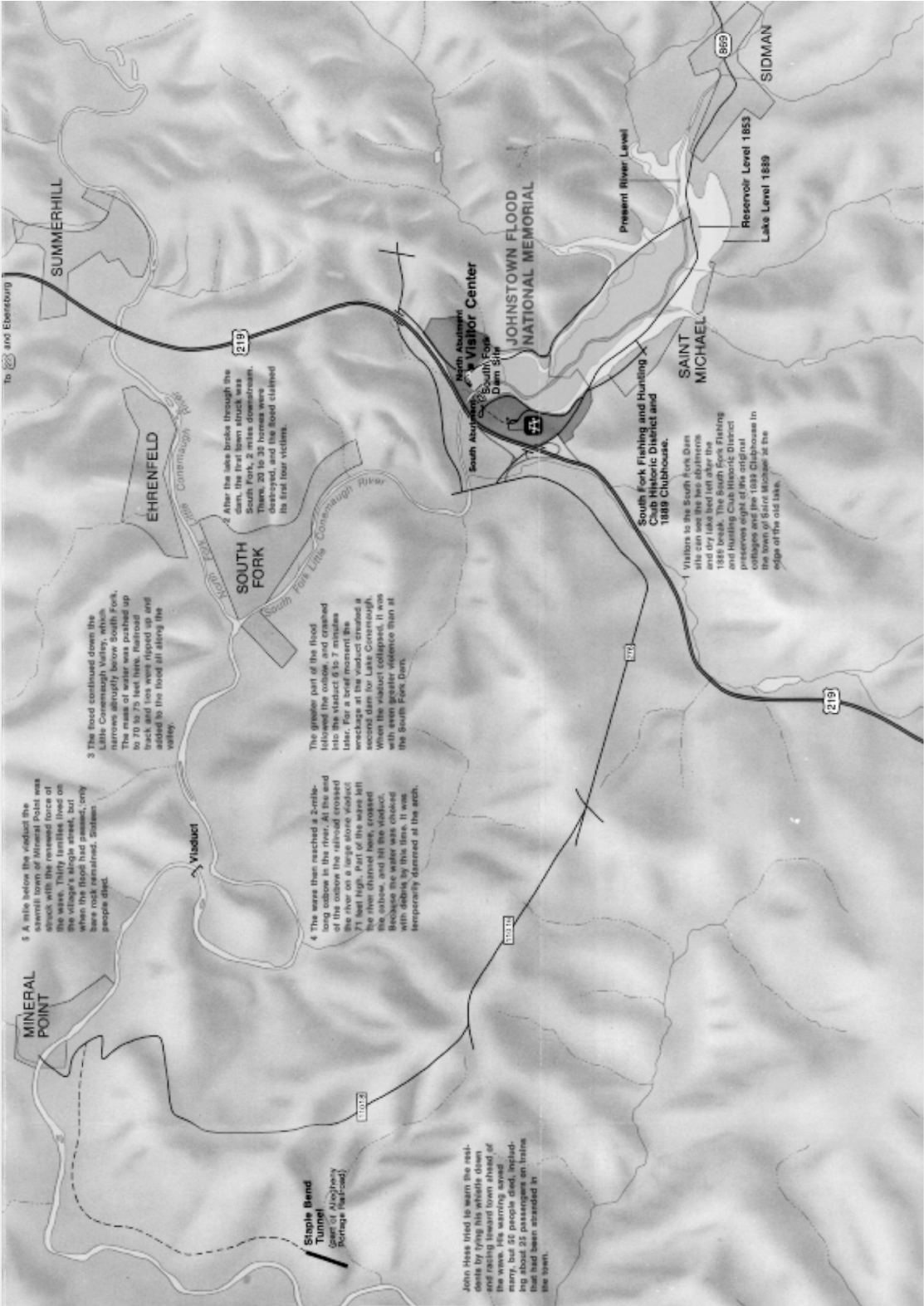
The Johnstown Flood NM is part of a four-site administrative unit in southwestern Pennsylvania that also includes the Allegheny Portage National Historic Site (NHS), the Fort Necessity National Battlefield and the Friendship Hill NHS.

2.3 Physical Description

The 165 acres of the Park preserves the remains of the South Fork Dam and portions of the Lake Conemaugh bed. The memorial site is bordered by U.S. Route 219 to the northwest and the Lake Conemaugh basin to the southeast. The memorial site provides views of the basin from two abutments of the historical South Fork dam. The park's major attractions include:

- The Visitors Center with exhibits and a 35-minute film experience that recreates the Great Flood of 1889;
- The Colonel Unger house overlooking Lake Conemaugh; and
- Walking trails to the north and south abutment of the South Fork dam from picnic areas on the abutments.

Figure 2. Johnstown Flood



2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Historic Site

The Johnstown Flood of 1889 resulted from the rupture of the old South Fork Dam maintained by the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. It was the deadliest flood in the Nation's history. The mission of the Park is to revere the memory of the 2,200 people who died in the flood through the education of the public. The Park also provides a recreational experience for picnickers.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

The number of visitors to the memorial in 1999 was 178,413. This represented a decline from 189,497 in 1998. Peak visitation of over 323,000 occurred during the 100th anniversary of the flood in 1989. Between 1990 and 1998, visitation remained relatively stable with a low of 179,000 in 1994 and a high of 199,000 in 1990. Most visitors to the Park are local residents who use the facilities for picnicking and hiking. Visitor Center attendance in 1998 was 37,677, down from a 1992 high of over 57,000. Peak visitation months are in the summer and fall foliage seasons. An ideal day visit to the Park includes time at the Visitor Center to view the exhibits, see the Unger house, a 35-minute film and a 15-minute ranger presentation, an hour-long bus tour around the lake bed with an interpretive guide, a picnic lunch at one of the picnic sites, and a short hike on one of the lake bed trails. A visit such as this may last approximately four hours. Most visitors stay approximately one to two hours including viewing the film.

The Park offers special programs during the summer months including a slide presentation entitled "Sailboats on the Mountain" and a ranger presentation entitled "Tales of the Great Flood." Most special programs are presented daily and a few, including the bus tour, are available on Sundays only.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Johnstown Flood Memorial has one entrance/exit to the Visitor's Center area and two picnic areas on the Lake Conemaugh abutments. Although parking is limited at both the Visitor Center and picnic areas, the length of visitor stay preempts the need for additional parking. Parking lots are rarely crowded and there is little to no congestion. The distance to the nearest town facilities necessitates a car. Figure 3 shows the visitor center parking lot on a summer day.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The nearest towns to the Johnstown Flood Memorial are small with few destination attractions for Park visitors. There are no towns directly adjacent to the memorial. The City of Johnstown has a museum that is not associated with the Park, and concentrates on the recovery. It is frequently a secondary stop to the Johnstown Flood NM.

Figure 3. Visitor Center Parking Lot on a Summer Day



3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The house of Colonel Unger, former President of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, is preserved as part of the national memorial. Colonel Unger had noticed the high-water level of Lake Conemaugh on the morning of May 31, 1889 and sent John Parke, the club's engineer to the nearest town to send a message to Johnstown. Figure 4 shows the house of Colonel Unger overlooking Lake Conemaugh.

The lakebed and memorial are cultural resources for the region but does not experience damage due to the transportation activities related to the Park.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The recreation opportunities available include hiking and picnicking. Neither of these activities is impeded by the traffic situation at the Park.

Figure 4. Colonel Unger House



■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

The Park is active in offering special seasonal programming for local and regional visitors.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The Park communicated with the Johnstown Flood Museum about special events, although primary coordination with the public occurs through the superintendent's office at the Allegheny Portage NHS.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

5.1 Magnitude of Need

Due to the low level of visitation, the specialized attraction of the Park, and due to the lack of parking and congestion difficulties, there is no immediate need for an Alternative Transportation System (ATS) at this time or in the foreseeable future. However, there are future ATS opportunities associated with the opening of the Staple Bend Tunnel unit and the Park's desire for additional interpretation of the flood, its causes and its aftermath.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

The opening of the Staple Bend Tunnel will create a need for improved transportation. The Tunnel, while a unit of Allegheny Portage NHS, is located only about seven miles from Johnstown Flood NM, and is accessible via a narrow, winding County road. Parking at the site will be very limited. Johnstown Flood NM Visitor Center would be the logical point from which to run a shuttle service to Staple Bend.

The Park currently operates a tour around the old lakebed on summer Sundays. An important part of this tour is the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club Historic District and the 1889 Clubhouse in the town of St. Michael. The story of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club is an important piece in understanding the events that led to the flood, and its aftermath. A shuttle between St. Michael and the Visitor Center would enable more visitors to experience these resources.

Park management has also noted that visitors could gain an improved understanding of the flood and its impacts via a full tour of the communities in the path of the flood between the dam and Johnstown. A shuttle service or a tour could be provided along this route.

■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Joanne Hawley, Superintendent

Keith Newlin, Chief of Maintenance

John Turner, Allegheny Ridge Corporation

Douglas J. Richardson, Park Ranger, Johnstown Flood NM